

Reassessing the Role of Religion in Western Climate Change Decision-Making

Cinnamon P. Carlarne

Environmentalism became a dominant form of secular religion in twentieth-century America.¹ It spawned powerful social movements that derived much of their moral and political authority from a type of “environmental fundamentalism,” which has been referred to as “the fourth great religious awakening.”² This environmental fundamentalism was often a reaction to social optimism grounded in the gospels of economic prosperity and the powers of science.

What we are now witnessing is an increasing number of people worldwide who reject both secular environmentalism and conventional economic gospels. Instead, they call for a more widespread discussion of how values should influence policy choices in the environmental sphere.³ Here we focus on religious values. For many, the secular religion of environmentalism fails to offer a satisfying response to the social, moral and physical dilemmas underlying the assignment of roles and responsibilities to address global climate change. This is not only true in terms of how religion influences economic policy, and the ways in which it plays a role in the philosophical framing of the debate, but also in terms of how religion influences climate change policy preferences.

Environmental law and policy choices can never be neutral. This is especially true in relation to climate change, which is defined by questions of intra- and intergenerational equity. The inherently value-laden nature of environmental law and policy necessitate a more thorough examination of what role religion plays in influencing the political frameworks that shape environmental decision-making in the climate change context.

Framing the Question

The starting point for this dialogue is a very simple one. Can the religions of the world help the global community come together to find a common way forward in addressing climate change? And, following from this, is this a proper forum for considering religious values in decision-making processes? While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to fully engage with each of these issues, several key questions merit consideration here.

First, is there a real possibility of inter-religion consensus on the role of humans in contributing and responding to climate change and the predicted consequences, considering the often patchy relationship between many religious perspectives and

that of mainstream science? Simply put, are we all in it together? Are our diverging approaches prompted by religious views or, to the contrary, by conventional economic and philosophical reasoning divorced from religious perspectives, thus highlighting a need to re-involve religion in the debate?

Second, while many may argue for convergence among religions, convergence must not be confused with incidents of cooperation. Real differences exist concerning humanity's inevitable destiny and the destiny of the organic world (e.g., apocalyptic, cyclical, or transcendent), as well as humanity's place in the universal order of things (e.g., from absolute earthly dominion to a gossamer thread in the web of being). Is it possible or necessary to unify such divergent perspectives to achieve consensus or a shared vision of rights and responsibilities in the climate context?

Third, how much can and does religion influence environmental policy, when we know that economic concerns are often our primary drivers? Should we really be asking how and to what degree religion can influence economic decision-making? This is a question explored in more detail in El-Ansary's chapter on Islamic environmental economics and Linnan's chapter on development, so we leave such matters to them.

Fourth, returning to science, as one commentator notes, "the products of science have proven less unambiguously beneficial than the true believers in economic progress once advertised."⁴ Climate change offers a looming example of this reality. Further, questions of uncertainty and of risk dominate climate policy discussions. In this context, we are constantly compelled to make value choices. What role do religious-based values play in this situation? Thus, returning to our previous question: In considering the relationship between religion and economics, must we not also necessarily discuss how religion influences social interpretations and responses to science in climate change decision-making?

Fifth, keeping the preceding questions in mind, let us put this debate in perspective. The current era of human control over nature dates back only 150–200 years.⁵ Of course, this time line overlaps precisely with the era within which we can trace the primary root causes of anthropogenic climate change. Can we look back over these past 150 years and trace any critical patterns in how religion and religious values have either influenced, or failed to influence, the decision-making processes that led to our current predicament and, in so doing, begin to think about the role religion can and should play in unravelling this web?

Sixth, the final framing question is arguably the most important from a legal perspective. Does any of this matter in the context of international climate change law and policy making? Ultimately, do political decision-makers at the state level take religious views or priorities into consideration when negotiating international legal agreements?

Bearing these underlying questions in mind, this chapter explores whether and how we can begin to trace the ways that religion and religious values are permeating climate change law and policy debates, focusing primarily on the United States and Europe as the dominant Christian voices in the global climate debate. Ultimately, we argue that the climate change debate has prompted renewed interest in reentwining religious perspectives in environmental lawmaking in the United States and, to a lesser degree, in Europe. The anticipated effect will be to reinvigorate the spiritual and ethical dimensions of the political debate on climate change. Climate change has sparked widespread debate over human roles and responsibilities toward the earth⁶ and, in so doing, has generated impetus for reexamining the role of religion in environmental lawmaking. Thus, while religion has been largely